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July 19, 2014: The Problem With Capitalism

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Title: The Problem With Capitalism

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7/19/2014—I have been introduced to the influential Russian Orthodox thinker Sergii Bulgakov. His masterwork is *Unfading Light* and I also have a collection of his works, *Towards a Russian Political Theology*. Russia's current actions in Ukraine, which culminated in the shooting down of a civilian airplane yesterday, widely attributed to Russian armed separatists in Eastern Ukraine, makes an acquaintance with Russian Orthodox thought increasingly relevant. Putin is reputedly a student of such thought. But Putin is not my particular interest. The two themes that Bulgakov addresses (for me) are socialism and human salvation. Socialism remains in some sense the only real alternative to capitalism. It also remains the only mirror in which the harms of capitalism can be viewed. Americans have not been able to think about any alternatives to the current political/economic organization. This is a failure of social imagination—as Roberto Unger has emphasized. For Bulgakov, socialism was a real possibility because he was a proponent of it before the Bolshevik revolution, a critic of it afterward and ultimately a thinker of it. The revolution of 1917 and the subsequent actions of the Soviet government demonstrated the evils of State collectivism. Bulgakov thought the problem was spiritual. Soulless socialism could never work. But soulless socialism is all the left can offer in the United States. Think of it this way—if materialism is true and individualism is good, why not capitalism? It is best at both. Only if materialism and individualism are false, or at least only partial, is capitalism mistaken. As for salvation, Russian Orthodoxy, Orthodox Christianity in general, did not shy away from the goal of divinizing humanity. A real change in the human was its goal. America has no such thought. And this lack of hope shows.